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An
Inaugural Dissertation

on
The treatment of Mania a Potu

by
The Spider's Web

by
Ric^d Sexton of Delaware.

Passed March 24th. 1826

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On
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Diseases in which the brain becomes a suffering part, and as a consequence its appendage the nervous system, form a class more mortal and untractable, than any other division of Nosology. The various fevers of the typhoid type, apoplexy, epilepsy, &c. occupy a most disproportionate part of the bills of mortality, and to treat them with any success, the physician must call into action his utmost judgment and attention.

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Mania à potu is a species of this class, which is very frequent in this country. It is that disease which so often ends the course of the habitual drunkard, and those are the persons most obnoxious to the complaint. In its nature it is very unmanageable, and the situation of the patient is such, as a medical man would pronounce extremely unfavourable for the operation of remedial articles; the combination of mental hallucinations springing from a morbid condition of the brain, with the extreme irritability of the nervous system, accompanied by an invincible vigilance, weakness & quickness of the pulse, and debility of the stomach, being the pathognomic distinguishment of the disease, very similar in the description to that of the last stages of other disorders. The muscular power of the patient most commonly, however, being comparatively little reduced, gives a basis for the hope, that he is not in reality so low as he appears; yet now and then we find the debility so great, as to prevent rising from the bed, and in such a case the most pressing

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The aim of all treatment in this complaint, is to overcome the morbid vigilance, which, if it does not cause many of the distressing symptoms, at least so encourages them, as to render them invincible, untill it be removed. Sleep indeed in this disease is a sine qua non, and the difficulty with which it is induced, is the most remarkable circumstance attending it.

There are three methods of treating mania à potu in use at the present time, each of which has numerous votaries, but perhaps the stimulant plan, or the 1st of our division is the most followed, and attended in the end with the least dubious success. Whatever mode, however, may be employed, it is generally but as a preparatory measure for the administration of opium, and if the other remedies only prepare the system for the full action of this, the end desired is obtained; for on its full effect we may place the most certain expectations of relief.

The stimulant plan of treatment which I have

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mentioned, consists in the administration of the patient's customary draught, or of some of the more volatile stimulants as the Carb. Ammonia or Ether. The mere stimulus of the alcoholic liquors, often proves sufficient to restore the patient, particularly if the disease be not far advanced, or if it originate entirely from the cessation of drinking in the habitual drunkard; but sometimes the stomach will refuse the remedy by itself, and then a few drops of laudanum may be mixed with the spirits, which combination the stomach perhaps will bear. The application of cold water to the head is also often found beneficial, particularly if the patient be in a recumbent situation where he may sleep. In one case I placed the patient's head under the spout of a pump, and caused a stream of water to fall on it for 10 or 12 minutes, and then wiping it dry, I made him lie down on bed, & in a few minutes I had the pleasure to see him fall into a sound sleep from which he awoke, relieved. In this case, it appears to me, the cold operated in the same manner as a dose of opium — by its sedative influence.

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The second method of treating mania à potu is by emetics. This practice originated with Dr Klapp of the city of Philadelphia, who reports many cases successfully treated by him in this manner in one of the numbers of the Medical Recorder. I never saw a case managed in this way, and therefore can form no positive opinion relative to it; but that it is successfull under particular circumstances, we have every reason to believe. Dr Chapman, whose opinion on any subject connected with medicine is eminent authority, delivered himself to this amount in his Clinical lecture at the Alms-house on the 19th November — " After the action of an emetic sleep is often induced, or at least the sensibility of the system to the impression of remedial articles is revived, so that sleep may be procured by a quantity of opium comparatively small, with what it would have required in the prior state of blunted susceptibility. Emetics, however, are contra-indicated in the greatest number of cases. There must be present a certain firmness of constitution, before

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they should be prescribed; for if they be administered to a patient much debilitated, they would produce an exhaustion, from which the system already on the verge of sinking would never recover."

This affection is treated, thirdly, by depletives. These are recommended by Armstrong in one division of his work on Typhus fever, and the practice is ~~further~~ carried farther by Dr Potter, his editor in this country, in the notes attached to the essay. Armstrong divides the disease into two stages, one of collapse, and another of excitement; depletion to be used in the latter, but to be avoided in the former stage. His plan & views, ~~however~~, are best described in his own language. "In very confirmed, old and enervated drunkards, the general collapse, at the time of attack, which the system experiences, seems to prevent the developement of any thing like an equable excitement; and we find the heat of the surface in that fluctuating or partial state, which often attends congestive fevers of the irregular kind. But in young or vigorous men, who have not been long or regularly accustomed to inebriation, sometimes

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a stage of general, though imperfect excitement follows that of oppression; and these different characters of the disease, as modified by peculiarity of constitution, should always be borne in mind, for they require correspondent variations in the treatment. In debilitated and habitual drunkards, for instance, I have invariably seen blood letting prejudicial even at the onset; and though mild purgatives are at that period beneficial, they cannot be safely exhibited at an advanced stage. On the contrary in constitutions that have not been shaken by reiterated drunkenness, I have known early and moderate venesection of much use, especially when followed by active aperients. For a long time I firmly believed that depletion was always dangerous in this disease; but as I had imbibed this prejudice from having witnessed its injurious effects in the advanced stages, so it has been removed, by my having seen it since beneficial in the beginning of numerous cases. Yet I am fully persuaded that there are not many instances where the lancet is really requisite" &c.* Of this system

* Armstrong on Typhus Sec. Edit. pg. 364.

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of treatment I have nothing to remark, except, that where Armstrong owns depletion by the lancet especially, not always requisite, I should be inclined to suppose it seldom if ever really beneficial; bleeding being his favourite remedy, and as is a very common and natural failing, he perhaps extols it beyond what the experience of others will sanctify. In the 8 cases of the disease that I have treated, I know I should have experienced the most acute compunction of conscience, had I drawn an ounce of blood in any one of them, so directly and decidedly debilitated had their intemperance made them; and I have yet to learn whether without this debility, mania a potu can exist.

The article of the Materia Medica the effect of which in this disease, this essay would desire to notice, is not a new introduction. Some centuries ago it was noticed as a remedial article for the cure of ague and fever; but it was untill lately rejected in regular practice. Within these few last years it has got the name of a very useful remedy

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for intermittent fever, and for diseases where there is much irritability of the nervous system; in the latter however the extent of its good effects is said but to cause a quietness of this irritability, proving but an adjuvant to other administrations.

I have been accustomed to use the Spiders web, of course in a limited practice, but seizing every opportunity I could, in cases of excessive nervous mobility, or of a particular irritation, and whether of an idiopathic or symptomatic character, I have rarely been ~~successful~~ foiled in the result. In one case of consumption following pneumonia, which was very quick in its progress and termination, I found it most strikingly beneficial, in alleviating the cough and giving rest to the patient, and though death took place, I can not ~~but~~ think, but that life was prolonged by the article. I have often used it in intermittent fever, sometimes however with a negative result, yet often enough successful, to convince me that it deserves a foremost rank among the remedies for this very common disease.

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One great difficulty with regard to the Spider's web that I experienced, was the almost impossibility of collecting a sufficient quantity of the fresh web for my experiments. The doses are from five to twenty grains, yet it is a large web that contains two grains. There may be found old webs in buildings which mixed with dust and other extraneous matters will weigh 10 or 12 grains, but I very much doubt of their possessing any of the powers of the fresh. In one case of intermittent, I exhibited 15 grains of this kind of web, taken from an out building, where perhaps a year had elapsed since it formation, without any evident effect, but a few days afterwards the administration of 12 grs. of the fresh web, overcame the paroxysm. There might indeed have occurred a change in the constitution, which rendered the disease more easy of suppression, but this I could not discover any evidence to confirm.

In the month of April 1825 there were placed in confinement at the gaol at New Castle, Delaware, several men from the Delaware & Chesapeake Canal. These persons

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were all labouring men and hard drinkers, and being denied their stimulating potations in the prison, in four or five days symptoms of the mania à potu began to be evident among them. At first five were affected, and when I saw them, one was very bad. They were all treated in the stimulant method, by the exhibition of brandy and opium; four of them recovered & one died. On one of them, who had taken the brandy and opium without procuring sleep, that state was induced, by pumping cold water on his head, as related before. On the day that one of them died, another man became affected who had been apparently well before; & owing as I suppose to the alarm produced by the death of his companion, he appeared immediately to be as morbidly affected, as those who had run through three or four days of the complaint. He could not be prevailed on to sit or lie down, but kept in continual motion about the room in which he was confined, and seemed at times to be in the utmost distress. Brandy was given him the first day & followed at night by three grains of opium. This had no effect

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on him, as next morning he was on his feet, & moving about in the same way. Brandy was given him on the next day, and I determined at night to try the effect of the Spider's web, which I had before found so useful in cases of nervous irritation. Accordingly, I administered twenty grains of the article in one dose at 7 o'clock in the evening. It was in the form of pills made up with a few grains of assafœtida, in which manner I was accustomed to exhibit it. The next morning the state of my patient was extremely improved; the wandering of his mind had ceased, and he complained only of sickness at the stomach and very great debility. One of his companions who remained with him through the night, informed me that about two hours after he had taken the medicine, he sat down on a chair, and leaning his head on his hand, complained of a pain in it; from this situation, after remaining in it some time, he undressed & lay down, and shortly afterwards fell asleep, and continued in that state untill morning. Brandy and water & nourishing diet was all that was afterwards

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In this case there was the most unequivocal evidence of the favourable operation of the ~~remedy~~ Spider's Web: nothing else was taken to cause the resolution of the disease so suddenly, and I never heard that it is one of those which spontaneously disappear. The second case in which I exhibited it, was not so indubitably relieved. To this patient I was called on the 29th September. He was also a labouring man from the canal, and who had been sent away for medical treatment. He was accustomed to inebriation, but about two weeks before I saw him, a fever of the remittent type, had attacked him, a prominent symptom of which was a very great irritability of the stomach, which prevented him from eating, or drinking any thing but water. The fever intermitted in five days, and became of the tertain kind, still, however, the debility of his stomach remained. Immediately after this change of his disorder, symptoms of mania a potu supervened, and continued with him more or less violent, according as his stomach would

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When I first saw the patient it was in the evening, and he, being in the hot stage of a paroxysm of his fever, felt, according to his own account, much better. His pulse were full, and beat 105 strokes per minute. As I had not seen him in the apyrexia, I could not suppose his debility so excessive as it was in reality, but I considered the fever as his chief ailment, and as a primary prescription I ordered him a brisk cathartic of calomel & Jalap. The next morning, however, I found my patient much worse, the purgative having operated freely, and plainly to his disadvantage. The symptoms were changed also, to those, which never can be mistaken as indicating any other complaint than mania à potu. There was present, the tremor of the hands, the weak & quick pulse with a cold dampness of the skin, and above all the muttering & incoherent expression, and apprehensive glances which were thrown to any moving thing in the room. The debility was so great as almost to prevent him from rising from

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the bed. As I considered my patient in the most imminent danger, I was averse to trying the effect of the Spiders Web, but prescribed brandy, & Opium in large doses. This practice was continued for three days, & the patient gained strength, but became more maniacal. During this time he was not sensible of having slept, although his nurse perceived him at times in a sleeping state. On the evening of the third day, I administered 25 grs. of the Spiders web in two doses, with three hours interval between their exhibition. This practice was attended with the most happy effects; the patient took both doses, and in two hours after taking the second dose, he fell into a sound sleep, which lasted 8 hours, and he awoke from it perfectly composed and rational.

That the exhibition of the spiders web is a novel proceeding in mania a potu, I can find no evidence to contradict. It seems, however, strange, that well known as were its powers in quieting nervous irritation, no experimenter should have applied it to this particular disease. Whether, future experiments of my own, or those of others, if any may think it

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worthy of notice, shall confirm what I have advanced relating to it. I know not; but of this I am certain, that whatever humility may be attached to the experiments I have made, I shall always be proud of the principles which caused me to make them.